

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Victor Vargas

"Rocks come as big as (chuckles), oh, as big as the table, you know, big ones. So working over there (Kōloa Mill), I learned how to solve some of the problems. And, oh, I started something that nobody had. I had started what they call the 'mud baths.' You throw all the cane and rocks into a mud bath, and it separated. The rocks sink and the cane floats up on top and then goes to the mill. And I sort of improved that . . ."

The tenth of sixteen children, Victor Vargas was born in Bago, Negros Occidental, Philippines on June 16, 1906. His father, Angel Vargas, was a farmer who later ran a business centering around a plow he had invented.

At age ten, Victor left home to live with his brother in Manila. Victor began the fourth grade at the University of the Philippines High School. Upon graduation in 1924, he journeyed to the Mainland U. S. to study mechanical engineering at the University of Detroit. After receiving his Bachelor's degree, Victor worked briefly for Ford Motor Company in Detroit, but was laid off in 1932 because of the Depression.

Victor then returned to the Philippines and was hired to work in a sugar mill on the island of Mindoro. He eventually ran the mill. After a change in the mill ownership, Victor left in 1938 for the island of Lahui, where he was hired to build a gold-mining mill.

When World War II suspended gold operations, Victor was again out of work. He returned to Manila, then eventually moved to New York City.

In 1950, Victor was hired by Grove Farm to set up a new sugar processing system at Kōloa Mill. In 1954, he was named engineer for the mill. During his tenure, he is credited with introducing many cost-saving processes, including the sink-float system for cleaning sugarcane before milling.

Retired since 1968, Victor lives in Honolulu with his wife, the former Conchita Arroccena of Kōloa. He has one grown son from a previous marriage.

Tape No. 15-57-1-87

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Victor Vargas (VV)

November 6, 1987

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Victor Vargas on November 6, 1987, at his home in Honolulu. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, Mr. Vargas, let's start by having you tell me when you were born and where you were born.

VV: I was born in a little town they call Bago, B-A-G-O, they spell that, in the Philippines in the island of Negros, on June 16, 1906. The place is still there. It's grown little bit, but (chuckles) you know those places way out in the provinces, they don't grow too much. They just stay as they are.

WN: So Negros was the name of the . . .

VV: Negros is the name of the island.

WN: Island?

VV: Yeah. It's a province because each island--some island has two provinces, some has only one province, and the big islands have a lot of provinces.

WN: But Negros is divided into Negros Occidental and . . .

VV: And [Negros] Oriental, yeah.

WN: What side were you in?

VV: Occidental. That's [west] side of the island. Oriental is the [east] side. Yeah, that's right (chuckles).

WN: What's the dividing, is it mountain range or anything?

VV: Yeah, it's a mountain range and there's one of the famous volcanos in the Philippines. The Mayon will--no, not the Mayon. The Mayon volcano is in Legaspi. (Laughs) I forgot the name [Canlaon volcano]. But anyway, it's a volcano. It's an extinct volcano.

The big mountain divides the two islands.

WN: Yeah, I see. I see. Are there major differences between both sides?

VV: The dialects.

WN: Oh.

VV: You can't understand, hardly understand each other from the other side of the mountain. They talk the dialect of the island next to them, you know. And we talk the same as the island next to us, our side, like the island of Panay, Iloilo Province. And the other one is Negros Oriental, next to Leyte and Samar--you heard about Leyte?

WN: Yes.

VV: Yeah. Leyte, where McArthur landed or something.

WN: What about geographically?

VV: What do you mean, geographically?

WN: Any differences in the two sides?

VV: No, it's just a small island if you can see it on the map there. It's just separated by mountain range, that's all. But, of course, you can go to the other side if you go around. We never had any roads over the mountains. We had to go all the way around. In fact, we used to go only north side. The south side had no roads. Now they have it all connected somehow.

WN: So both dialects were Visayan?

VV: Visayan, but a little bit different. The Negros Oriental, that's on the other [side] from where I was born, talk the same as the islands next to them like Leyte and Cebu. And Samar. And the side we were next to, Iloilo and the island of Panay, and we talk with (chuckles) dialects.

WN: I see, I see. What was the major industry in that island?

VV: Oh, sugar. That's where the--I don't know why--it's full of sugar mills up till now. That's why they call it the sugar island. I think, our side, huh. The other side, nothing but coconuts. They have one sugar mill there, but a small one. But our side of the island, Negros Occidental, has all the big sugar mills. The biggest one, of course, up north on the island of Luzon, near Manila. That's the newest one. But for a long time, most of the sugar came from Negros island.

WN: Did the two sides differ climate-wise?

VV: No, climate in the Philippines is about the same all over. When it rains it (chuckles) rains, and when it's hot it's hot.

WN: I see, I see. So what was your father doing in Negros?

VV: Well, my father, he was a--of course, most people were farmers, huh? Then my father had (chuckles) pretty good head. He started making plows. You know, the Filipinos have a native plow made out of wood with a cast iron point that they call "share" and a moldboard, you know, that turns the soil. And they bolt that piece of wood like you see plows--I showed you a model over there. But that once used to be made out of wood. And my father was a pretty good blacksmith, see. (Laughs) And he started making it out of iron. And he got a patent. (Laughs)

WN: Really?

VV: To this day, I try to figure out how he got the patent (laughs), I don't know. Because I wanted to get a patent myself on an idea I had. But he had a good lawyer and this guy somehow got the patent for him. And that's way back in 1911 or '12, something like that. So that's how we lived over there until I grew up and then I left home.

WN: So your father had his own business?

VV: Oh yeah, until he died. In fact, [the business] was still going long after he died. My sister took care of it because we all left home except one sister and one brother. And my brother and my sister that were left, they took care of that until it all. . . . See, what happened is, the Chinese started copying the thing. The Chinese merchants, oh, they very smart because anything they see that they can make, they'll make it. So after a while, we didn't make it anymore and the Chinese keep making until today.

WN: The same kind of plows?

VV: Yeah, same kind (chuckles). Because the people like to use that over there. Of course, there's tractors and everything now, but still the little farmer can't afford to buy a tractor. Usually people have a little bit of a farm and so you can only buy a carabao and pull the plow with it. We call this carabaos. Water buffalos.

WN: Water buffalo, yeah.

VV: These are strong animals, you know (chuckles).

WN: Did you people farm at all?

VV: No, by the time I knew what was going on, my father was making the plows already. So, I guess he used to farm before I was born.

WN: I see.

VV: Yeah, he was all right because he was able to send us all to school.

WN: Was your father, in terms of social standing, a little higher than most of the people . . .

VV: He was, sort of, yeah. Because somehow he made his money with this thing, and then he had more money to build a big house. (Laughs) So, he had a big house. We had a big house.

WN: How many bedrooms did your house have?

VV: Oh, gee, I don't know. The house just spreads all over (laughs). I know it had a great big living room, about as big as this whole apartment. And two bedrooms on the side, and I don't know how many bedrooms in the back. And the kitchen, and everything else. Those days they used to build big, big houses. And the living rooms, oh, bigger than this whole apartment without the partitions.

WN: I see.

VV: And the floors were always made of hardwood and they shined. (Chuckles) You know, in the Philippines, everybody who has a touch of a little money had servants. And so, we had servants to clean the house and shine the floors every day. I don't . . .

WN: So most of the people living in the towns were farmers or sugar workers?

VV: Well, in that island, yeah. In the island of Negros there's hardly any--well, some people planted rice or whatever, but most of that island used to be all sugar. That's why they have a hard time now because sugar has no price. I mean, it's got a very low price. They were starving there for a long time. I don't know how they are now. I should read more about it but I haven't been back there. In fact, in the papers I saw some articles about people starving in Negros and really having a bad time.

WN: Did you do any work at all with sugar when you were in the Philippines?

VV: No. I told you I left home when I was ten years old and went to Manila to live with my brother. And I studied there until I finished high school. And after high school, I went to the Mainland [U.S.] and was on my own.

WN: Why did you leave home at ten years old?

VV: Well, because my brother was in Manila, my home was in one of the islands in the south, and he wanted me there. And somehow I (chuckles) got there and I started going to school from the fourth grade. Until I finished high school, I was with my brother in Manila. My brother was, oh, he had a good position all the time so he was all right. Being a member of the family, if we moved house,

I used to take care of things like that, you know. Help my sister-in-law.

WN: Did your father want you to stay back and help with the business at all?

VV: No. The business was sort of running by itself after he had good men that could make them all. And my sister and my younger brother were the ones--and my mother, too--they were tending the store and selling. You know, some of them were being exported to the other islands. But most of it was local.

WN: I see. What was the name of the business?

VV: Vargas Plow Factory.

WN: Oh.

VV: Yeah. (Chuckles)

WN: I see.

VV: You know, I had--I don't know, where do you live, here?

WN: I live in Pauoa--I mean, I'm sorry, I live in 'Aiea now.

VV: Oh, 'Aiea. No, because I made a little something, bigger than this. [VV points to a miniature train set he had made.] And at the center there's a--looks like little factory. And I put "Vargas Plow Factory" (laughs) on the sign. And somebody wanted to buy it so I sold it, and they had it in exhibit at the hobby shop in Hawai'i Kai for a while. I don't know who's got it now. Maybe it just deteriorated or something.

WN: And you made a replica of your father's factory?

VV: Well, no, I made a little town with a model railroad going round and round, you know. Just for the model railroad.

WN: Oh, oh.

VV: And so, there was a little factory in the center of the thing, so instead of just leaving it being a factory, I just put a little sign on top, "Vargas Plow Factory."

(Laughter)

VV: Then my friends, whoever saw it, they said, "Hey, this is Victor's." You know, I had little houses like that, see, and a railroad going around, but was a big table.

WN: So you lived in Manila for about eight years, went to high school. Which high school did you go to?

VV: No, I lived, let's see, from [age] ten till high school. The University of the Philippines High School. They had a high school. And after I graduated from there, I went to the Mainland.

WN: Why did you go to the Mainland?

VV: Well to, (chuckles) just for. . . . First I went to the Mainland as a musician, you know.

WN: Oh yeah?

VV: Yeah. I used to play the banjo. And I organized a little band, with the President liners chain. They usually get Filipino musicians. And I organized a little band so we can go on the ship. I took a trip and we went, came back. And a year later, I went back to study. So I goofed off (laughs) for a year. And then I didn't know where I was going, but I landed in Detroit.

WN: Why Detroit?

VV: Well, (laughs) it's a story again. When I took the ship to go back to the states, and not knowing where--well, I had in mind that I was going to some engineering university. The only engineering university I knew was Marquette. They said, oh, Marquette's got a good--it's in Milwaukee. So I said, "I'm going to Marquette University." When we were in the ship the two other boys from my same town, from our same island, were going to [University of] Detroit. I said, "No, I'm going to get off at Marquette, Milwaukee," 'cause I decided I want to work for (chuckles) Ellis Chalmers, that's a factory in Marquette.

But when I was just about to get off the train, the other guys says, "Oh, come on Vic, let's all go--you going to land there, you don't know anybody. Please, just the three of us (laughs) get together and we all go to Detroit. We all work for the Ford Motor Company."

They were determined to work for Ford Motor. So just before I got off the train, they convinced me, so I got another ticket to get to Detroit. You know, the train stops in Chicago, and then I was going to get off in Chicago and transfer to go into Milwaukee. Anyway, so the three of us ended up in Detroit. And there's where we finished school.

WN: How did you get the money for tuition?

VV: Well, those days it was cheap. Hundred and twenty-five dollars was all the tuition you paid for the whole semester. I had about \$500 with me, you know, and so, from that. Then the school gives you a job. They call them cooperative schools. You work one week or two weeks and then go back to school one week for this five-year course. So that's how. You don't have that kind school anymore. They have, but, of course, it's so much more expensive these years. It's hard to live with doing that. But there are students in school who work

their way through. I guess there'll always be. But, you know, it's a good school because the school gives you the job. They divide the classes into A and B. I was section B, so I went to work first. And then after two weeks, you go back to school and section A starts working. So like that all the time. And the course was five years instead of four years. Engineering course. Then I went to school like that till I finished.

WN: What kind of engineering?

VV: Mechanical engineering, I took. When I graduated, it was the depression. Nineteen thirty, and I never knew depression in my life because I was always working. And I had gotten married, you know. I married a girl, a Haole girl in Detroit, and we had my son who is--he is the only son. When the depression came, I was laid off, but I didn't know it was temporary. I thought since so many people were. . . . I used to work for a long time during the depression--you know the depression was about 1930 to 1932. I don't know how long, but I was working for a long time. And then 1932, we used to get scared when we go to work because there's a lot of unemployed, you know, they'd be watching then. They'd look at me and they say, "What the heck, maybe he's a Chinaman or something and still going to work. How come?" But I was finally laid off. And then I had my son already, and my wife, so I decided to write home for money to go home. So I got money from home and we left for the Philippines. In the Philippines I didn't know what to do. My mother . . .

WN: Did you go with your wife?

VV: Yeah, with my wife, my boy. So I worked with my father in his plow factory making plows and all kinds of things. And we had a little piece of land where my mother and father used to plant sugar on the island of Negros, but that was sort of a temporary thing. And I worked for a while, about a year, with my father's plow factory. And my brother knew a lot of people because he was in the government. And one of his friends was an American who was handling the Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company, and he was a member of all kinds of boards of directors in the business. And he found out that his friend had a brother who was a mechanical engineer. And somehow, in [1932], this man, Stevenot his name was, happened to get hold of a sugar mill. I mean, he was made a member of the board of directors of a sugar mill, sugar plantation. And he didn't have anybody to run it. He had somebody, but it was on the island of Mindoro. Mindoro is a (chuckles) God-forsaken island. Nobody likes to go there because it's full of malaria. People were dying of malaria over there if they were not careful, you know.

WN: Oh yeah? Was that a sugar island, too?

VV: No, there was just one sugar mill and it's--the first sugar mill built there. So, I got a job there and that's how I learn how to (chuckles)--I didn't learn anything about sugar, really. I worked

there until 1938. Nineteen thirty-two to 1938, I worked at the sugar mill at Mindoro, Mindoro Sugar Company. Until somebody took it over.

These people I was working for, Stevenot, was a good friend of my brother. And he wanted a mechanical engineer to run his sugar mill that somehow he became member of the board of directors. I mean, chairman of the board of directors. So I wasn't doing anything. So he said, "Okay, you go over there and see what you can do."

So I went to the sugar mill and I didn't know anything about sugar, very little. We lived around sugar mills all our lives, but I never studied or got any experience in it. So, anyway, this friend of my brother's, Major Stevenot, he put me in the tractor shop. And we were the first ones to bring the Caterpillar tractor to the Philippines, you know, for plowing, for pull the plows. And I was in charge of the tractor shop. (Chuckles) I didn't know anything about tractors. Just by--as long it had instruction books, I could follow (chuckles), you know.

WN: What did you do? Repair tractors?

VV: No, I was head of the tractor shop. I just showed them what to do to repair it. Well, I could do it myself, that's why. And if worse comes to worse, or most of the time, I had to work with my own hands and show people because nobody would know otherwise. They had to have somebody to show them. But it sort of comes to you, I guess, to me it was easy. And then I started in the tractor shop for about year or two years. Somebody was running the sugar mill, and all of a sudden, this old man he got too old, I think he want to retire. So, Stevenot, my brother's friend that put me in there, he says, "You go to the mill, learn how to run it (laughs)."

I went over there. The fellow running it then after the chief engineer quit was an old man who almost grew up in the mill, you know. He was a practical man, he wasn't an engineer, but he know everything about the mill. So he [Stevenot] says, "Mr. Ocampo will show you what to (chuckles) do." So I worked with Mr. Ocampo for about a year. And after a year, Mr. Ocampo says, "Mr. Vargas, I don't know how to write. You better take this job over." And he kept telling the boss, see, that he doesn't want to be chief engineer because he doesn't even know how to write reports. And Stevenot says, "Oh, yeah, yeah. Okay, okay, I didn't think of that." See, I was working in the tractor shop. So right away, I was in the mill. So I was assistant mill engineer over there until I learned everything about it.

WN: Was it a major sugar mill? I mean, was it, was the tonnage higher than most . . .

VV: Well, it wasn't a major sugar mill. It was the only sugar mill in the island of Mindoro, but it was the first mill that was built in the Philippines.

WN: Oh, I see.

VV: And I stayed there till 1938.

WN: Was it any more or less productive than the mills in Negros?

VV: No, it's comparable, but the only thing is, it depended under how much land you had, you know. In Negros, there were planters that contributed cane or had their cane milled. In Mindoro, that all belonged to the company. And so we only had a small crop. We had 10,000 tons quota. We could only make 10,000 tons of sugar. Those days they had quotas that each mill can make only so much, allowed so much. So our quota was 10,000 tons because we were small. We only work about three months in the year in the mill. Of course, the plantation work all year 'round. So I stayed there until this friend of my brother's, Major Stevenot, who was the big boss, he got into gold mining somehow. (Laughs) I don't know how these people--well, they're businessmen in Manila. And all of a sudden he says somebody bought the sugar mill, see. One of the big sugar companies in the Philippines either bought or got hold of the sugar mill where we were. So he says, "Victor, get out of there and I'll get you another job." He says, "Go to this island." It was a little bit of an island as big as Ni'ihau (chuckles).

WN: What's the name of the island?

VV: Lahui.

WN: Lahui?

VV: Yeah. L-A-H-U-I. Almost like Līhu'e, you know (laughs). That Lahui, it's as big as Ni'ihau. And here was this gold mine. And the island is solid rock, you know. They had already dug a shaft and they were going to build a mill. Because the mine was going good already, and they just piled all the ore that they were mining, outside. So the boss gave me all the plans in Manila. Gave me a construction crew. And we started building the gold mill. And I didn't know gold mills, (chuckles) nothing. And he says, "Don't be scared because as soon as you build, as soon as you start over there, I will send you some people from the Mainland, from the coast, gold mining people, to help you." So, they send those people there. Some miners and some mill men, you know. And I wasn't scared of the job, I'm pretty good at that because I can understand what it is, as long as there's plans, see. So I built the gold mill, and everything else went all right. And the mill was operating pretty good, making money and all that. Then the war came on. So after the war [began] everything shut down, you know, in the Philippines.

WN: When you said "built the mill" . . .

VV: Built the mill.

WN: . . . you mean, you designed it and . . .

VV: They had already designed it. Somebody had designed it, I guess, from California. What I did was build the building. I set up all the buildings and put the equipment in and. . . Well, it wasn't hard as far as I'm concerned. Of course, some people are scared to do those kind of things, but (chuckles) somehow I was never scared of anything like that. Then it operated until the war broke out and then had to stop. So we got out of there 'cause the Japanese were going to take it over. So (chuckles) I went to Manila without a job again.

WN: Did the war affect your father's business?

VV: No, my father had died. During the war years, I was not home when my father died. During the war I was not doing anything because I was in Manila. And right after the war, I went to California, to the states. I went to New York, and one Sunday I was reading the paper and has a want ad, a mechanical engineer with sugar mill (chuckles) experience. My God, New York, (chuckles) New York, what do they want with a sugar mill over there? So I went to see the guy. And it happened to be that the man who put on the ad was a man who built the sugar mill where I worked.

WN: In Mindoro?

VV: In Mindoro, yeah. He was pretty old already. He said, "My gosh." So it was just like old times, we had a lot of things to talk about. He asked all what did I do over there, and how was it, and everything like that.

WN: He was Filipino?

VV: No, American. He had invented some kind of a powder for cleaning raw sugar so it will come out from the mill almost white, like eatable sugar.

WN: You mean you mix it with the raw sugar?

VV: No. It comes out from a raw sugar mill already almost white. You install some machinery, some filters, that's all.

WN: I see.

VV: So I worked with this--they call the Elguanite Corporation. And . . .

WN: How you spell that?

VV: Elguanite. E-L-G-U-A-N-I-T-E. Well, the man's name was Naugle. N-A-U-G-L-E. And somehow he combined that to make Elguanite. (Chuckles) And he sold this to Grove Farm [on Kaua'i], the process. I mean, he was marketing it, he was trying to sell it to people, and

Grove Farm was the only one that wanted to try it. Because thinking that if it was successful, he'd sell it to the other. . . . You know, they'd own the patents over here and they'd sell it to all the mills in and . . .

WN: You were telling me earlier that Cuba bought it, too.

VV: No, no, no. Oh, Cuba tried it.

WN: Cuba tried it?

VV: Yeah. So, somehow, I don't know, they didn't get along so I worked there for eight months to install the thing and run it and everything, but somehow, I don't know what politics they had that they got out of Cuba and told me to go back to the Mainland. And then they had little jobs here and there and finally, he says, "You go to Hawai'i." (Laughs) They made arrangements for Grove Farm. They sold the process to Grove Farm. So that's how I got to Hawai'i. I said, "Oh boy, all these years. All my life I've been wanting to come to Hawai'i if I had a good job." I had a degree and everything and I thought I was a pretty good engineer, mechanical engineer, and I know I could do the job. But without friends, I'd still end up doing something else, you know.

WN: I'm wondering, you know, in Hawai'i, at the time, there was lot of Filipinos there.

VV: Oh, yeah. Here, there's still a lot of Filipinos. They all . . .

WN: I was wondering why you didn't think of coming here to try . . .

VV: No, because I knew if I came here without knowing anybody, I'd end up cutting cane (chuckles) or working in the factory doing some menial job. I didn't want to do that. So I had a degree and everything and I knew I could do good work but I was afraid, if I didn't have any friends, oh, it is impossible.

WN: I see.

VV: And I didn't know this job was going to land me in Hawai'i, so. I said, "Hawai'i, at last," I think. So that's how I came to Hawai'i.

WN: When was this? What year?

VV: Nineteen forty-nine, 1950.

WN: Nineteen fifty?

VV: January 12th, 1950, I think I landed in Hawai'i.

WN: What were your first impressions of Hawai'i?

VV: Ho, you know, you come from the Philippines, you always pass by. Of

course, you only see Honolulu. And I always say, "Oh boy, this is the best place to live (chuckles) if I can live here."

WN: You mean the boats stop in Honolulu on the way to . . .

VV: Oh yeah. The boats Yeah.

WN: Oh.

VV: And then later on, the planes stopped in Honolulu. So I always wanted to live in Hawai'i. 'Cause it's nice, you know, the climate here is better. Philippines is nice, too, but it's hot. So when I get this job, well, that's it (chuckles), I stayed in Hawai'i ever since.

WN: So you came to Kōloa, directly?

VV: Yeah. They took me down--I got here January 12th, 1950. Was it '50 or '49? Nineteen forty-nine, I think. (Chuckles) And they took me directly from--as soon as they picked me up from the plane and put me in another plane with one man. American Factors, they had a man that took me straight to Kōloa. Was the same day I arrived here in Hawai'i, and so I got stuck there. (Chuckles)

WN: So you came to Kōloa and then you helped set up the . . .

VV: Set up this Elguanite plant, you know. So they give me a little house, made it into my drafting room. I had to design the whole thing [i.e., Elguanite process] to fit the place there. See, you don't buy it [i.e., materials] from stock. You have to design it to fit the place, so I had to design the building and everything. Bought the materials and everything, and then made the drawings, and constructed everything until the plant was in operation. And, the operation was doing all right, but they couldn't sell the process because we used to get nice, almost white sugar. But nobody else wanted to buy it, so they abandoned Elguanite. Elguanite went back to New York. But the Grove Farm manager was so impressed with my work, he says, "Would you like to stay with us?" (Laughs)

So, I said, "Sure."

I was making \$500 a month, you know, then. Five hundred dollars was top salary in those days. And then I had \$500 for expense account.

WN: Yeah?

VV: Yeah. But, even without the expense account (chuckles) I took the job anyway. To hell with the expense account.

WN: Why wasn't the Elguanite process accepted?

VV: Well, these people over here they got their own--see, they send all their sugar to the refinery in Crockett--and that refinery belongs

to all the plantations here.

WN: Crockett Refinery in California?

VV: Yeah. That belongs to the group of plantations from Hawai'i. They send all of their sugar over there and it's refined, and, of course, whatever, they get their share.

WN: So it's a total, the refining is totally different process than from Elguanite?

VV: Oh yeah, yeah. Elguanite was a process for making white sugar from raw sugar direct. You know, you squeeze the juice from sugar. Right now they squeeze the juice and it goes directly to be boiled. They just let the impurities settle down the decanter. They just get the top clean juice and boil that and make the sugar. But Elguanite, all the juice had to pass through filters, cloth filters. It was a very messy process, and hard, too. So, actually, it wasn't very practical. So they didn't sell over here--I mean they couldn't sell the process. So they abandoned it. They wanted me to go to New York, but the manager of the plant in Kōloa . . .

WN: Who was the manager?

VV: Moragne. William Moragne, [Sr.]. He died just a few years ago, quite a few years . . .

WN: He died pretty recently?

VV: Not very recently, but a few years ago.

WN: So he asked you to stay?

VV: Yeah. I (laughs) wanted to stay but I didn't say anything, you know. Then he says, "We're not buying the process, but we're impressed with what you have done, and we'd like you to stay and improve our mill." Because, oh, it was all in a mess, that little mill in Kōloa.

And, you know, only in Hawai'i they have cane-cleaning plants. Because they bulldoze cane over here [i.e., Hawai'i], and the other parts of the world, they cut the cane. And the [cut] cane comes practically clean and they just dump that in the mill. But here, they have to wash it. You still can see in 'Ewa, [i.e., Waipahu] we got one of the biggest cane-cleaning plants. Kōloa had a little bitty one that (laughs) just sort of wash the thing kāpulu kind. So I started improving, improving, improving until I developed a system that was better than the 'Ewa one.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: So when you said a cane-cleaning plant--so, for example, if you cut the cane that means the cane is clean already? You don't need a cane-cleaning plant?

VV: Oh yeah, if you cut the cane by knife, and then it's already clean, they just load it in the cars. But if you bulldoze cane, you'd bring out the roots and everything, see.

WN: Oh, I see. What else, besides roots, what else was in the cane?

VV: (Chuckles) Rocks. Big rocks come. So the cane-cleaning plant has to have a rock separator and cane separator, you know, separate the cane from the dirt and then the rocks and everything. And all the Hawaiian plantations here had cane-cleaning plant. And Grove Farm [Kōloa Mill] had a small cane-cleaning plant. It was, you know, half-ass kind. It worked, but it (chuckles) didn't work so good.

WN: Well, they said that Kōloa was really a rocky. . . . The land is rocky . . .

VV: Oh yeah (laughs). Rocks come as big as (chuckles), oh, as big as the table, you know, big ones. So working over there, I learned how to solve some of the problems. And, oh, I started something that nobody had. I had started what they call the "mud baths." You throw all the cane and rocks into a mud bath, and it separated. The rocks sink and the cane floats up on top and then goes to the mill. And I sort of improved that so much so that later on, I built the three plants in Puerto Rico with--really big plants--with the rock separators and everything. The Puerto Ricans were impressed by (chuckles) Kōloa because they had a good rock separator.

WN: Was Kōloa the first on Kaua'i to have a cane-cleaning . . .

VV: No. All the [mills] had cane-cleaning plants, but it was just simple, made the rocks sink. But we improved it better, so that it's working better than the other. We put in what we call "sink-float system." We make the mud bath, where the rocks would sink but the cane would float. The density of the mud, of the bath, is so that the cane would just float and the rocks would sink.

WN: I see. And then, what would happen to the rocks?

VV: Oh, it goes out. It goes in the trucks and thrown back somewhere else. But the idea is to not let the cane sink, only the rocks would sink. So you got to maintain the density of the mud so the cane would float on the mud bath and the rocks would sink down.

WN: Is it done that way today?

VV: Yeah.

WN: They still do it today?

VV: Yeah. Over here in Hawai'i, anyway. And, I don't know if Puerto Rico has any more sugar mills, but I built three of them over there. Big ones. The mills here are small compared to the Puerto Rican plant mills.

WN: So when the cane comes from the field, it goes to the cane-cleaning plant first?

VV: Yeah. You can see that in 'Ewa, yet. In case you . . .

WN: You mean O'ahu Sugar [Company]? Waipahu?

VV: Yeah, O'ahu Sugar. Waipahu. And, I don't know, if--the other one on the North Shore?

WN: Oh, Waialua?

VV: Waialua. I don't know if they're still open. I don't--which one closed?

WN: They're still open, but they're talking of closing it [i.e., Waialua Sugar Company].

VV: Uh huh.

WN: Pretty soon.

VV: Waialua has some good cleaning plant, too.

WN: Oh yeah?

VV: Well, it's just the same sink-float system, but it's not bad. And O'ahu has the same old one, but they don't want to spend too much for a cane-cleaning plant so they never built a new one. Kōloa had a makeshift one which I improved, and I put in that bath that they are also using now. But I really had a good time in Puerto Rico because I built it from scratch, see. And I had to put all the improvements that I thought necessary, and they really worked good.

WN: So the cane-cleaning plant at Kōloa was there already? You just--you improved it?

VV: Yeah. Yeah.

WN: I see. Whose place did you take as mill engineer?

VV: Herman Brandt, [Jr.]. It's in the book.

WN: Herman Brandt?

VV: Yeah. He was getting old and wanted to retire. When I came, they

had nobody to take Herman's place. And he wanted to retire, well, they gave me the job.

WN: What type of a manager was William Moragne, [Sr.]?

VV: Oh, he was all right (chuckles). He's a very good man. Very efficient man. He was a civil engineer. And he knows engineering pretty well, too. And you couldn't fool him. (Laughs) Well, we got along fine. He's the one who asked whether I wanted to stay after the Elguanite didn't turn out so good. He says, "We don't want to buy the Elguanite, but we'd like to have you stay."

I didn't even ask for how much salary I would get (laughs). He told me to stay, so, "Sure, I'll stay."

I told you I was making, those days, \$500 plus expenses. If I stayed, I would get \$500 but no expenses. I didn't ask for any more, you know, as long as I could stay. I used to send the \$500 to my wife in Detroit and lived with my (chuckles) expenses. Until my wife came over.

WN: "Expenses" meaning what?

VV: Expenses, all your expenses, they pay. Your rent, then your food, and everything.

WN: Yeah?

VV: Yeah. Except your clothing. Subsistence, yeah.

WN: So where did you live in Kōloa?

VV: In Kōloa, first I lived in an apartment there. There's a little apartment by Kūhiō Park. It was taken away by the tide, you know, when we had the storm over here . . .

WN: Hurricane [Iwa].

VV: . . . a few years ago? I lived there for a while, then later on, I bought a little house. And Blake had a house right in front, right on the water, and that house was blown away by the storm and it saved my house. (Chuckles) So my little house is still there.

WN: Oh, yeah?

VV: But I had sold it to a Haole lady. And I'd been wanting to buy it [back] from her, but she don't (chuckles) want to sell it anymore.

WN: This is in Po'ipū?

VV: It's in front of the Kūhiō Park. Prince Kūhiō Park. You know Kōloa off pretty good?

WN: Yeah.

VV: Yeah. The house is still there because the lady is still living and I don't know what she's going to do with it if she passes away. But, I guess she's going to give it to somebody. We offered to buy it back from her, but she doesn't want to sell.

WN: When you first came to Kōloa, what was Kōloa like? How would you describe the town?

VV: Well, it had not improved too much until recently, you know. When all these young Haoles came and started to put stores. It was an old Kōloa town for a long, long time until just recently. Because just slow. Everybody know everybody. And now it hadn't improved so much, but they have more stores and it's a little livelier than before.

WN: Touristy?

VV: Before, it had the Chinese store, Chang Fook Store. (Chuckles) We used to buy the bread, they used to make good bread. And then, Sueoka Store, and then they have the company [i.e., plantation] store, way on the other end. Post office. And they had an old Japanese or was it Chinese man's, oh, I can't remember the name. My wife can remember all that because she's from there. And I got married there, my wife's from Kōloa.

WN: Your second wife?

VV: Yeah.

WN: I was wondering, you were living in New York and Detroit, how did it feel going to a small plantation town?

VV: Well, I went to New York looking for--I didn't know where I was, I was just traveling around there looking for something, whatever I can do. And as I told you, I read about--did I tell you? I read the New York paper where an ad wanted an engineer with sugar mill experience, you know. So I went over there and then I found this guy that built the mill. (Laughs) That's how I got here.

WN: So you were the mill engineer for about fourteen years from '54 to '68?

VV: Eighteen. Eighteen years. [VV worked in Kōloa Mill for eighteen years, fourteen as mill engineer].

WN: Eighteen years?

VV: Yeah, almost twenty years. Then I retire.

WN: Were there major changes in the mill operation during that time?

VV: Well, you just improved it. You could not change the mill too much because, you know, it's hard. You cannot lengthen it or anything like that but you just improve it to make it more efficient. And the cane-cleaning plants, same way. We couldn't improve it too much because there's no--it's all compact. The way it was built, you couldn't make it longer or you couldn't (chuckles). . . .

WN: How would you compare Kōloa mill with, say, the mills in the Philippines?

VV: Oh, the mills in the Philippines, they were built after the mills in Hawai'i. The Hawaiian mills were old. The ones in the Philippines were sort of more modern than the ones over here. They're big mills over there. The mill that I started with was the oldest, the first sugar mill built in the Philippines, in 1911 or '12 or something like that. And the Mindoro Sugar Mill, I think, they sold it to somebody. I don't know if it is still operating or not. Maybe not anymore.

WN: Kōloa Mill was built around that time, too.

VV: Yeah, yeah.

WN: But it was a lot smaller than the Mindoro one?

VV: The Mindoro one had big machinery, big rolls. But the Kōloa mill, the machinery is smaller size, but we got so that we improved the capacity just by improving. You could not make the rollers bigger or anything, but you just made them more efficient so it could gobble more cane. It's on the setting of the mill and everything.

WN: So the capacity of cane that could be processed was . . .

VV: Oh, it was doubled.

WN: Doubled?

VV: Oh yeah. Yes. (Chuckles) Kōloa used to grind about forty tons an hour. And I got there. We sort of improved it and then we finally got it to grind more than 100 tons an hour, with the same equipment. Of course, you just alter the equipment a little bit, like the rolls. We had to know how.

WN: I was wondering, supplies for mills, did you get it here in Hawai'i or did you have to get from . . .

VV: You know, used to have the Honolulu Iron Works, remember? They were the ones that supplied most of the equipment for the mills. They used to have a big factory. They had a foundry and everything over here. In that . . .

WN: Kaka'ako [O'ahu]?

VV: Yeah, Kaka'ako. And they used to make those rollers and everything over here. Now days they still have the foundries in Hilo, Hilo Iron Works. They still supply things for the sugar mills. Few sugar mills are working now, so, I don't really know how the situation is now.

WN: What is the future of sugar in Hawai'i, in your opinion?

VV: Ah, not the future with sugar (laughs). They got so many ways of making sugar (chuckles) from corn, now, so I don't know. I couldn't tell you. They're struggling hard to stay afloat, but I don't know, one of these days they might have to give it up. I hope not, but that's a lot of people, labor and everything. And a lot of land, eh? So I haven't followed it anymore for a long time. I get the sugar news and everything, but I hardly read it now.

WN: You know, in '74, McBryde Sugar took over from Grove Farm Kōloa Plantation.

VV: Yeah. McBryde Mill had big equipment, you know, but they were very old. And Kōloa Mill, we kept improving and improving. And even if it was small--the size of the equipment itself was smaller--they could grind more than McBryde. They could put more cane through. They measured by the tons. When I came, Kōloa used to grind about forty tons an hour and that's about how much McBryde used to grind also. But their equipment were big. The rollers were big and everything. But, you see, it's not very efficient because he only had three tandems, three rollers, three sets of rollers. Kōloa had four sets, but they were small. But we found (chuckles) a way of improving the capacity by increasing the size of the rollers and the grooving. It's an art of some sort, you know. We were getting 120 tons an hour instead of the forty tons that was supposed to be the rate. So, finally, McBryde gave up because their equipment was so old. They took over Grove Farm. Although Kōloa Mill is older than McBryde I think (laughs), but . . .

WN: So that 120 tons an hour, was that faster than most of the other mills on Kaua'i?

VV: Oh yeah, 120 tons is pretty good for a small mill. Līhu'e is the biggest one because they have two tandems, they call it, they got two mills side by side in one of the buildings. And, so . . .

WN: Two buildings?

VV: In one whole big building, but they got two mills, two . . .

WN: Rollers.

VV: Yeah, two sets of rollers. But Kōloa has only one. But before I left it, the little mill in Kōloa could grind just as much as one mill from the Līhu'e, you know. And the Līhu'e mills were bigger. Just question of, (laughs) that's a trick to do it or whatever.

Because people get used to, oh, this mill can only grind that much, and they're not pressured to produce more from what equipment they have, so they just keep on like that. Like Līhu'e Mill, so much capacity that they didn't have to do anything else but just put the mill together back every time, you know. You see, we used to take the mills apart every off-season, and clean 'em up, and then re-groove them, re-machined them, and put 'em back again. But in Kōloa, we were struggling to increase the capacity all the time, so we were able to increase it to a pretty good capacity.

WN: In terms of labor required for the improvements that you made, was it an increase in labor, increase . . .

VV: No. Labor about the same. Now it's more efficient, and they only have one man running (chuckles) the whole mill. They still made--after I left--they made some more improvements. They start putting in a lot of automatic controls. Then they change the engines, instead of these old steam engines, they change it to turbines. But the cane-cleaning process is the same no matter (chuckles) where you go because they cannot do anything better than that.

WN: You mean, the sink-float bath?

VV: Yeah. See, in the old sink-float baths, they had water jets that push the cane. So I devised something else. I put the ship propellers in the bath, so the propellers would turn and then the water would go around and around and around, and it was faster. And the cane would not sink because the cane would be like floating in the river of a high-density mud.

WN: I see. So how far would the cane float before it got to the . . .

VV: Oh, about ten, fifteen feet. From the place where the cane drops [to the cane conveyor], you have a bath like or water that floats. So the rocks would fall through instead of going on the conveyor, so you have to allow, oh, about ten feet or whatever. Because we used to have rocks as big as (chuckles) this, come out.

Oh, it was a great game but you had to--it's (chuckles) just a way of living, I guess.

WN: Well, it's like, I think, it's a coincidence that you were born and raised on an island of sugar in the Philippines and ended up making your life's work sugar.

VV: (Chuckles) Yeah. And it never dawned on me that I'd end up in the sugar mill. I went and studied engineering, but they don't teach sugar engineering. Except, if you go to LSU [Louisiana State University]. They have a little mill there where they train the--they actually have cane, sugar engineering. A lot of engineers in the Philippines went to LSU.

WN: Is that right?

VV: Yeah.

WN: Well, before I turn off the tape recorder, anything you want to say?
About your work?

VV: (Laughs) I think we talked quite a while already. I don't know how
it will sound, but.

WN: Well, thank you very much.

VV: (Chuckles) Oh, you're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

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